



# Thinking Out Loud on Paper

*The Student Daybook as a Tool to Foster Learning*

Lil Brannon  
Sally Griffin  
Karen Haag  
Tony Iannone  
Cynthia Urbanski  
Shana Woodward



HEINEMANN • PORTSMOUTH, NH

**Heinemann**

A division of Reed Elsevier Inc.  
361 Hanover Street  
Portsmouth, NH 03801-3912  
www.heinemann.com

*Offices and agents throughout the world*

© 2008 by Lilian Brannon, Sally Griffin, Karen Haag, Tony Iannone, Cynthia Urbanski, and Shana Woodward

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the publisher, except by a reviewer, who may quote brief passages in a review.

The authors and publisher wish to thank those who have generously given permission to reprint borrowed material:

Excerpts from *Using the Workshop Approach in the High School English Classroom* by Cynthia Urbanski. Copyright © 2005. Published by Corwin Press. Reprinted with permission of the publisher.

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Thinking out loud on paper : the student daybook as a tool to foster learning / Lil Brannon . . . [et al.].

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN-13: 978-0-325-01229-2

ISBN-10: 0-325-01229-6

1. Teaching—Aids and devices. 2. School notebooks. 3. Diaries—Authorship. 4. Creative thinking. 5. Creative writing. I. Brannon, Lil.

LB1044.88.T54 2008

371.33—dc22

2007039802

*Editor:* Jim Strickland

*Production:* Lynne Costa

*Cover and text designs:* Jenny Jensen Greenleaf

*Cover photograph:* Cindy Urbanski

*Typesetter:* Kim Arney

*Manufacturing:* Steve Bernier

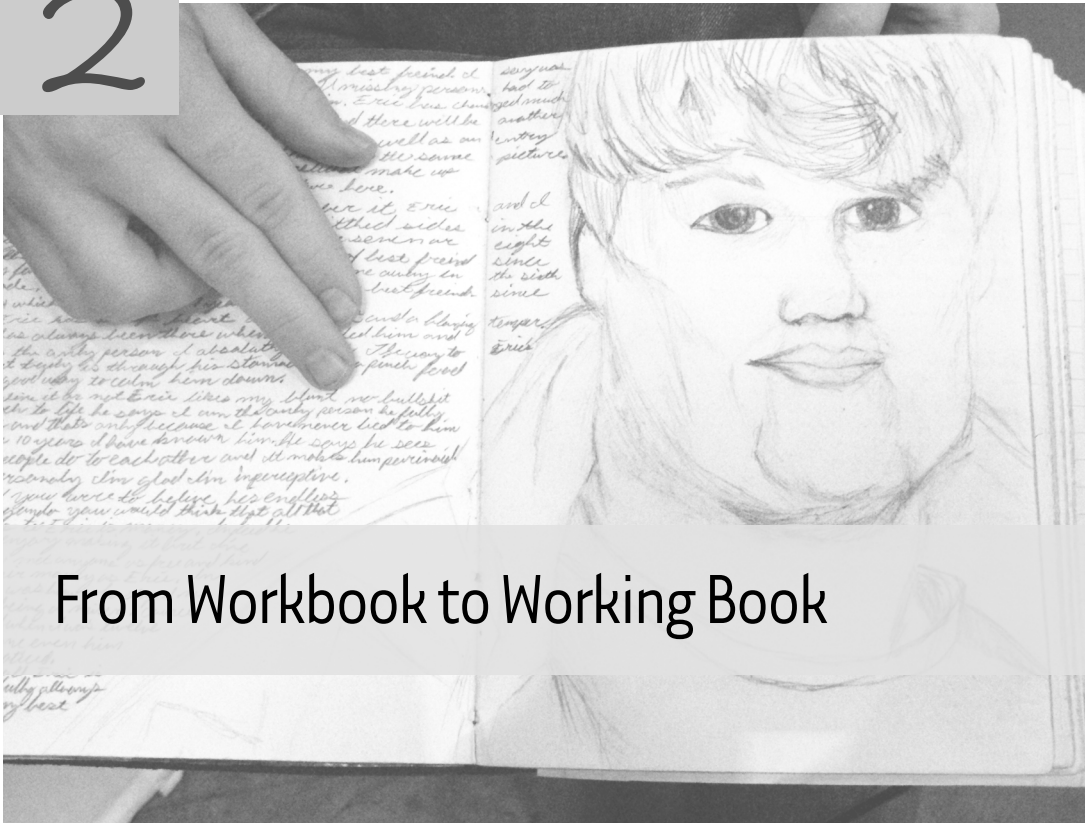
Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

12 11 10 09 08 VP 1 2 3 4 5

# CONTENTS

<b>Acknowledgments</b> .....	<b>vii</b>
<b>1 Introducing the Daybook</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<i>Why Call It a Daybook?</i> 2	
<i>What Grade Levels Are Daybooks Right For?</i> 3	
<i>Who Are We?</i> 5	
<i>Some of Our Encounters with Daybooks</i> 7	
<b>2 From Workbook to Working Book</b> .....	<b>10</b>
<i>A Tale of Two Classrooms</i> 10	
<i>What Is a Daybook?</i> 11	
<i>Why Daybooks Work</i> 12	
<i>Theory Box: The Daybook: A Student's Process of Learning</i> 13	
<i>Karen's Story: A Teacher Writer Discovers Daybooks</i> 14	
<i>Becoming Writers with Our Students</i> 16	
<b>3 Introducing Daybooks to Students</b> .....	<b>17</b>
<i>Karen's Introduction to Daybooks: An Elementary Literacy Coach's Perspective</i> 19	
<i>Theory Box: The Daybook: A Place for Freely Sharing Writing, Ideas, and Language</i> 19	
<i>Tony's Introduction to Daybooks: A Fourth-Grade Teacher's Perspective</i> 20	
<i>The 6–12 Connection Box</i> 22	
<i>Cindy's Story: Introducing the Daybook at the High School Level</i> 23	
<i>Theory Box: The Daybook: A Place for Writers to Think and Develop</i> 23	
<i>Lil's Daybook Opener: A College Teacher's Perspective</i> 26	
<i>The 4–6 Connection Box</i> 27	
<i>What to Remember About Introducing Daybooks to Students</i> 28	
<b>4 Organizing the Daybook</b> .....	<b>29</b>
<i>Karen: Super Organized</i> 30	
<i>The 4–12 Connection Box</i> 30	
<i>Theory Box: The Daybook: Making Word Learning a Natural Process</i> 32	
<i>Cindy: Moderately Organized</i> 34	
<i>Theory Box: The Daybook: Helping Students Understand the Editing Process</i> 35	
<i>Sally's Organization for Creative Writing Class</i> 36	
<i>The 4–12 Connection Box</i> 37	
<i>Tony's Organizing Scheme: Middle of the Road</i> 38	
<i>Shana's Organized Chaos</i> 39	
<i>The Ultimate Organizational Invention: Landscape Handouts</i> 40	
<i>What to Do When You Finish a Daybook</i> 41	
<i>What to Remember About Organizing Daybooks</i> 41	
<b>5 Sustaining Daybooks: Creating the Toolbox</b> .....	<b>42</b>
<i>Karen's Daybook Tools: An Elementary Literacy Coach's Perspective</i> 43	
<i>The 6–12 Connection Box</i> 46	
<i>Cindy's Daybook Tools: A High School English Teacher's Perspective</i> 47	
<i>A Daybook Tool from Tony: Adaptation of Smagorinsky's Body Biography</i> 50	
<i>The 4–6 Connection Box</i> 50	

<i>Lil's Daybook Tools for Reading Complex Texts</i>	54
<i>Theory Box: The Daybook: Enhancing the Social Nature of Reading</i>	58
<i>Sally's Daybook Tool to Eliminate Writer's Block: Metawriting</i>	59
<i>What to Remember About Sustaining Daybooks</i>	61
<b>6 The Daybook Goes Digital</b>	<b>62</b>
<i>Theory Box: The Daybook: A Bridge to Digital Literacy</i>	63
<i>Shana's Virtual Daybook: The Mindings Collage</i>	64
<i>The 4–12 Connection Box</i>	74
<i>Tony's Community Daybook: The Class Blog</i>	75
<i>The 6–12 Connection Box</i>	77
<i>Sally's Tech-Savvy Classroom: Daybooks Meet the Digital Age</i>	78
<i>Concluding Thoughts</i>	80
<i>The 4–12 Connection Box</i>	82
<i>What to Remember About e-Daybooks</i>	83
<b>7 Assessing Daybooks: Valuing Process over Product</b>	<b>84</b>
<i>Karen's Assessment: Creating Reflective Students Bit by Bit</i>	85
<i>Theory Box: The Daybook: Documenting and Enhancing Learning</i>	89
<i>Cindy's Daybook Defense: Replacing Tests with Reflective Assessment</i>	89
<i>Tony's Assessment: The Daybook Defense Goes Elementary and Cross-Curricular</i>	94
<i>The 4–12 Connection Box</i>	96
<i>Lil's Challenge to the Daybook Defense</i>	97
<i>Shana's Use of the Portfolio to Make the Daybook the Center of Final Course Assessment</i>	97
<i>Sally's Warning About Assessment and a Strategy for a Nonassessment Assessment</i>	105
<i>Concluding Thoughts</i>	108
<i>What to Remember About Assessment</i>	109
<b>8 Using Daybooks in Teacher Research</b>	<b>110</b>
<i>Theory Box: The Daybook: A Place for Teachers to Record Experience and Change Practice</i>	111
<i>Karen's Story: Keeping Track of Learning</i>	112
<i>Sally's Story: Reaching Hard-to-Reach Students</i>	113
<i>Cindy's Story: Pulling It All Together</i>	117
<i>Daybooks as Instruments for Change</i>	123
<i>What to Remember About Daybooks and Teacher Research</i>	123
<b>9 The Value of the Literacy Toolbox: Reflections on the Daybook</b>	<b>125</b>
<i>The Daybook's Importance in Literacy Instruction</i>	126
<i>Shana's Story: Critical Theory Meets Practice</i>	126
<i>Theory Box: The Daybook: A Way to Redefine Our Literacy Instruction</i>	127
<i>Reflections on Getting the Daybook Started, One Step at a Time</i>	129
<i>Tony's Story: Ten Minutes to School Literacy</i>	130
<i>Lil's Story: Learning Takes Time</i>	131
<i>Spreading the Word in Schools</i>	132
<i>Cindy's Story: Let the Students' Work Speak for Itself</i>	132
<i>Karen's Story: The Literacy Broadcast</i>	133
<i>What Students Say About Their Daybooks</i>	134
<i>Now What?</i>	137
<b>References</b>	<b>139</b>



## From Workbook to Working Book

*Writers write. They use writing throughout their day. They use writing to learn, to think, and to feel. Writing is like breathing. Writers can't live without writing.*

—LIL BRANNON

### A Tale of Two Classrooms

Once upon a time, students sat in rows at desks in a classroom. Typically, the students would hunch over their workbooks grasping number-two pencils. “Who is the main character?” a student wondered; she had to answer ten questions about the story. “The main character is . . .” she wrote, dutifully remembering to write in complete sentences. She yawned as she lazily scrawled a period at the end. The classroom was absolutely silent. She looked around. Nine more questions to go.

Another student sat puzzling over the directions in his workbook. “Write about a time you confused right with left,” the prompt read. The student stared at the blank page. He looked at the clock. He had absolutely nothing to say about this topic. In fact, he cared nothing about the topic at all. The school district bought this workbook for every child. Many pages were not filled in, not because the boy hadn’t done the work, but because the teacher had neither the time to assign nor to read all the workbook pages. The teacher only had time to feel guilty as she circled the room to make sure everyone was completing the assignments. “Perhaps, they will complete the pages over the summer,” the teacher thought, trying to justify the cost of the workbooks.

Contrast that classroom to a very different classroom: A quick scan of the room reveals desks grouped together, creating tables. There’s a hum of voices as children go about their work. Some sit on the floor with a partner or two eagerly sharing what they wrote about last night. Others read and prepare for discussion groups. They mark the reading with sticky notes so that they will remember their observations and/or questions for reflective writing later. Some students write double entry journals, like notice/wonder charts, to remember their thoughts when their discussion group gets together. Each student searches for clues that might reveal what is going to happen in the book she is reading or a theory about why the author wrote the book in the first place.

The students lean over to one another to get help when they are stuck. The teacher meets with small groups of students every day teaching them how to read, write, talk, recognize their thinking, and listen to one another. Mostly, she observes carefully and takes cues from the students. All of this thinking, reflecting, problem posing, and discovery gets recorded safely into her daybook—a journal of sorts, but with a *big* difference.

## What Is a Daybook?

---

We think of the daybook like that drawer in the kitchen where we stick everything that does not yet have a place, but we know we might need someday. It’s not quite trash, but it is the leftovers, the twist ties, the artifacts of where we have been. The daybook serves as a place where students put all of their thoughts throughout the day. It isn’t a binder with sections. It isn’t even a binder. We use an old-fashioned composition notebook because it is cheap, has a hard cover, and its pages stay put. Before daybooks, our students often misplaced their work. Now, the daybook serves as a collection place to keep everything, and we mean *everything*. Discussions and lessons grow out of the

practice students do and the questions students ask, all of which are recorded in their daybooks.

A daybook needs to be a hardcover notebook with stitched-in pages. It needs the hard cover so students can bring it back and forth from home to school and keep it in useable shape. A daybook with pages that are difficult to rip out forces students to gradually let go of the perfectionism they have learned to expect of themselves. They learn to accept pages that don't work. With help, they view mistakes as potential successes. Drafts that turn out to be lists, for example, can be viewed as a dozen possible story ideas. In order to capture the true essence of a daybook, we discourage our students from using spiral notebooks, three-ring binders, or fancy, expensive, easily damaged journals. By sticking to these guidelines, teachers and students don't have to worry about spiral-bound journals locking together when they all are stacked in one place, or pages coming loose, binders becoming bent, or the avalanche that inevitably happens when anyone tries to pick up more than three binders at a time.

## Why Daybooks Work

---

In *Jazmin's Notebook*, Nikki Grimes writes, "It seems like ideas are like gossamer, or mist, fragile as a dream, forgotten as soon as you awake" (1993, 25). But with daybooks, ideas don't get scattered and lost any more. One daybook can bring organization to a writer's life, even a messy, disorganized writer. The daybook differs from a journal in that the daybook includes much more than just the students' personal and often private thoughts.

Like writers' notebooks, daybooks are a place for students to store all of their writing on the way to creating a final product. But they also keep in their daybooks math problems, social studies questions, and their private thinking about what happened at lunch. Students need this place to hold onto the thoughts and notes they discover throughout their entire day, not just the time they are in English class. So daybooks are not just for writing—they integrate all subjects. They are often messy and filled with incomplete pages. Many daybooks have colorful sticky notes marking important pages. Some students divide their notebooks into chapters, but they don't have to. Also, we usually don't write to the students in their daybooks, and more importantly, we don't grade the writing in the daybook but we do check to see that students are doing their work. (See more on assessment in Chapter 7.)

Ralph Fletcher explains his writer's notebook in this way: "Most of what goes into a notebook defies description. Labeling it, well, stuff, is about as close as you

## ***The Daybook: A Student's Process of Learning***

A daybook captures students' thinking, making it visible to them. We often tell our students that the writing in their daybooks is their "thinking out loud on paper." We say we aren't so much concerned with the quality of their writing but with the quality of their learning. The daybook is a student's process of learning. James Britton, in his essay "Language and Learning Across the Curriculum," says that writing of this kind is useful for teachers who already understand that learning isn't uni-directional; that is, learning isn't the students writing down what the teacher says. Learning is interactional and social in nature. Teachers and students learn together, or as Britton says, "Knowledge is a process of knowing rather than a storehouse of the known" (1983, 221).

When we shift our focus from *product* to *process*, the daybook becomes an essential tool for learning. Lev Vygotsky (1978), a Russian psychologist, claims that students develop as writers when they are using writing to fulfill some need that lies outside the act of writing itself. Much the way infants learn to speak in order to understand and be understood, young writers learn to write by making sense of their world and communicating that understanding to themselves and others. Writers, therefore, need to write often so that they make their thinking—their processes of thought—apparent to themselves.

can get. If your notebook is like mine, it will fill up with stuff you can't quite live without" (1996, 25). A daybook is just stuff, the stuff of a child's day, the stuff that she will return to as a reader, writer, and thinker.

The view of writing discussed in the Theory Box above is very different from more traditional purposes of writing in schools, in which students write down what the teacher says or copy notes from the board, and where writing is more "fill in the blanks" or "follow the formula" than it is thinking and learning. A daybook won't work well in a traditional classroom because there is no purpose for it. A daybook works in classrooms that are concerned with what and how children learn and where teachers are curious about what and how children think.

Donald Murray, from whom we have already acknowledged our debt for the idea of a daybook, writes that his "students become writers at the moment when they first write what they do not expect to write" (1982, 3). "Writers," for Murray, "seek what they do not expect to find. Writers are like artists, rationalizers of accident. They find out what they are doing after they have done it" (1982, 4). Instead of knowing in advance what their topic sentence is, students discover what they want to say in the process of saying things. Many writers have this experience, and Murray collected those writers' experiences in *Shoptalk* (1990). For example,



*I'm working on something, I don't know exactly what. (115)*

—EUDORA WELTY

*Inch by inch the words surprised me. (105)*

—WILLIAM KENNEDY

In order for a daybook to matter in teaching and learning, teachers and students must come to terms with what it means to be a writer. If writing and thinking were easy, we wouldn't struggle as teachers with how to help our students find their voices as writers. Daybooks can become *working books*, where teachers and students work out their ideas and think and explore their worlds. Teachers must give class time for writing, knowing that when they do so they are giving class time for thinking. Teachers must give class time to share bits and pieces of this writing, so that everyone can hear how a writer thinks or feels or makes sense of experience. In doing so, teachers and children begin to understand that they are writers.

Daybooks have been our way to make our classrooms a community of writers. Karen's story, which follows, shows how she moved from notebooks to daybooks, making her classroom come alive with writing.

### **Karen's Story: A Teacher Writer Discovers Daybooks**

---

A skeptic, I was reluctant to try a daybook. I was a three-ring notebook kind of girl. Ripping out pages, moving pages around, and hole-punching papers to add to my binder worked for me. I liked writing on a thick stack of lined paper with just the right pen. Wadding up papers and arching them into the garbage can like I'd seen writers do on television helped me do my best work. At the time, I was not writing for myself either. I was only doing the writing that I was required to do as a teacher, the icky, boring stuff.

As I began to write for myself, I discovered I enjoyed the smallness of the daybook and how it fit in my bag. It traveled with me easily. Having it with me helped me jot down ideas as they occurred to me. As I experimented with my new daybook, I felt the freedom of not worrying about mistakes, not crossing out ideas or throwing away pages. The fact that the pages were stuck in a bound composition book required that I hold on to all this material. What I discovered was that with the binder, I tossed away ideas that could actually have become a part of other writings. Or perhaps what I found was that with the daybook, my writing could grow out of the little bits and pieces of many different days. I felt free to

experiment with my writing by writing in different colors, in the margins, and sideways. After all, it was my daybook and I wasn't showing it to anyone.

Thoughts came to me while watching television, riding in the car and at school, eating breakfast or brushing my teeth. My ideas didn't get lost anymore because my daybook was close at hand. On the rare occasion when I left it at home or at school, I felt uncomfortable. I learned to write on scraps of paper and then glue them onto the pages when my daybook and I were reunited. When I thought of a story idea, I would jot it down in the back of my daybook. I realized that I began turning to the *last* page because I could locate it quickly. The last page became my topic list.

I also began inventing solutions to my writing problems. I labeled ideas I wanted to come back to with quickly drawn clouds that I could spot as I flipped through the pages of my daybook. I still wanted to give students handouts, and I wasn't sure how to incorporate these pages into a composition book (the binder did work well for these materials). My resolution was to fold the page in half, run a glue stick down both sides of the folded edge, and then stuff the fold of the paper inside my notebook. I closed my daybook and pressed on the binding. The handout stuck so well, I could pick up my daybook by holding the glued-in sheet.

As my daybook grew fat, I realized how important it would be to invite my students to keep a daybook as well. As we started to work together, I shared with my students all the tricks I had discovered, such as the clouds I put around great ideas, the pasted in pieces that I didn't want to lose. As all our daybooks grew, we found it difficult to locate the next fresh page quickly. So, we started using a rubber band as a bookmark or a sticky note to label places we needed to find quickly. The rubber band also became a great place to hook a pen, so we could have our favorite pens with us at all times as well.

Once I attempted to make sections for our daybooks but gave up on that. The stick-on dividers worked fine, but I couldn't guess how many pages we might need for each section. Also, I couldn't figure out what chapters worked consistently. So instead, we started simply dating everything instead of fussing with divisions. (Lil uses the same colored sticky notes on pages that might work or feed into something she is writing—yellow stickies are ideas that go with a workshop she is preparing, pink stickies go with a grant application she is working on. They are like dividers with a difference; instead of pages being all together, they are linked by the rainbow of colors.)

When my first daybook ran out of pages and I started my second, I knew I needed some way to keep track of the pages that really mattered to me, such as a table of contents to make it easier to revisit my ideas. I numbered the pages in the upper corners and made a list of the pages that really mattered to me, or that

I looked at from time to time. Locating what I needed by flipping the pages with my thumb was easy when the pages were numbered and catalogued.

About this same time, I began writing more on the computer. Moving from pen to type meant I had less in my daybook, and I went many months without using it. Then I realized I missed my daybook: I still needed a place to take notes and to catch thoughts when away from my desk. I also found it invaluable for revising—if I were stuck at my computer, I'd locate my daybook, find a fresh page, and freewrite revisions. Breaking away from the computer helped me find my way through my writing. I also looked forward to rereading my writing and feeling accomplished as I filled the pages. When stuck for ideas, I took my daybooks down from the shelf and leafed through them, often chuckling at my doodlings. What I was thinking had a permanent home in a daybook. As the daybooks multiplied, I began to see how much I was growing as a writer. I knew instantly that my elementary students would be able to see their growth as well.

## **Becoming Writers with Our Students**

---

Karen's story is a story shared by all of us. As our classrooms became places for writing and thinking rather than filling in blanks and regurgitating information, our students became excited with us about their stories, their ideas, their learning. Because we all keep daybooks right along with our students, we are constant models and coaches for the kinds of thinking and writing we want them to do. Those of us who teach elementary school find that integrating our students' daybooks and, therefore, their thinking and writing skills across curriculums makes for better understanding and learning in all areas. Those of us teaching high school find that our students carry what they learned by using their daybooks in English courses over to other classes and disciplines. Cindy and Sally have even had many students email from universities to say that they are still using their daybooks. When Lil and Shana assign daybooks in their college classes, students have said, "I love daybooks. I kept one when I was in elementary school with Mrs. Haag or Mr. Iannone" or "Did you learn about daybooks from Mrs. U. at North Meck?" We find that the daybook is the single most powerful tool we can put into the hands of our students. Daybooks energize our teaching. Daybooks give students voice and authority. Daybooks fill our classroom with exciting ideas, with joy, and with surprise. In the next chapter we will show you how we get them started.